CHAPTER 6

DEMONCATIC SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN CANADA’S PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS: PROFESSIONAL VALUE AND SOCIAL ETHIC

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Three purposes are generally acknowledged for public school education in Canada. One is aesthetic, becoming all that you can be, and the classic liberal notions of what it is to be a well-rounded educated person. The second purpose is economic, learning to earn, acquiring the skills and knowledge to be a contributing member of society. The third is ideological, encompassing both the socialization of learners as citizens and the perpetuation of a society’s cultural norms and values (Hodgkinson, 1991). Given the theme of this book, one might naturally conclude that this chapter would focus on the contribution of school leaders to the ideological purposes of inculcating and promoting democracy as a fundamental social value and an ethical guide to proper citizenship. As much as this may be an important dimension of education, our approach is to make the case for democratic leadership in schools for rationalized professional reasons.

Democratic leadership is desirable for schools because it reflects socially mandated ethical commitments to collective process and is professionally justified as necessary to lead schools effectively in increasingly culturally diverse communities and a world transformed by the effects of technology and the forces of globalization. Our rational professional justifications for democratic leadership in schools are grounded in the nature of the school leadership role, the social contexts of our communities, as well as an ideological social mandate. Existing theory and research illustrates that rational processes prevail as the primary influences on decision making by educational leaders. The appropriateness of rationalized democratic processes for schools is demonstrated by recent research on school-based leadership.
interactions between school principals and parent advocates engaged in negotiating the educational needs of students with exceptionalities. This particular study investigated how principals and parent advocates understand and respond to their perceptions of the roles, values, transactional practices and processes associated with resolving highly complex issues in special education. A particular emphasis was put on exploring the ways in which parent advocates use democratic process to promote value confrontations and conflicts as a deliberate strategy aimed at transforming attitudes and practices in school administration specific to special education processes.

THE CHALLENGE OF RESPONDING ETHICALLY AS WELL AS DEMOCRATICALLY

Given the conditions of social ferment and diversity characteristic of many communities, the achievement of democratic consensus on educational issues among even traditional educational stakeholders has become more difficult, confounding any notion that a prescriptive guide to ethical or value-added leadership – a catalogue of correct values which school administrators ought to adopt without question – can be developed. This will disappoint those who might hope that ethics can be used as a silver bullet solution for the dilemmas of administration in complex environments. Unfortunately, the processes of valuation in school leadership situations are much too context-bound to permit this kind of quick fix. It is not enough for school leaders to emulate the values of expert principals. Leaders in schools must become reflective practitioners and authentic in their leadership practices. The first step towards achieving this state is to engage in personal reflection (see Coombs, 2004). The adoption of a values perspective on school leadership can assist school administrators; however, once a degree of improved self-knowledge has been achieved through personal reflection, administrators need to take the next step towards authentic leadership. That is, they develop sensitivity to the values orientations of others in order to give meaning to the actions of the students, teachers, parents and community members with whom they interact. The pay-off occurs when understanding the value orientations of others provides leaders with information on how they might best influence the practices of others towards the achievement of broadly justifiable social objectives.

Ethics as Cultural Isomorphs

School administrators in the United States, Sweden, Canada and Hong Kong are much inclined to profess a belief and commitment to democratic processes and democracy in general. Yet the nature of democracy in each country is clearly based on sharply contrasting notions of what constitutes free speech, social consensus, and appropriate political participation by the citizenry. A comparison of the acceptable standards of free speech in the United States and Belarus or China is a clear example. However, isomorphs can occur even within a single nation or culture, not